



How To Spot “Junk Science” Reports

Aurora A. Saulo, Department of Tropical Plant and Soil Sciences

Consumers are regularly bombarded with news reports on foods, nutrition, fitness, and health. For example, rarely a week passes without the media reporting stories of contaminants detected in foods. Some reports are attention-getting articles in popular publications, while others may represent the latest scientific findings in scientific journal articles. But the average consumer doesn't have a technical background to help sort out real news from sensational tactics. How does one know which report is true and which is “junk” science? Here are some caution signals, along with some examples when necessary, that can help you spot junk science reports.

- The recommendation promises a quick fix (for example, a food is promised to “melt fat away”).
- Dire warnings of danger are made about a single product or regimen (for example, sugar and MSG have long been misleadingly singled out as dangerous).
- The claims sound too good to be true (for example, an herbal product purported to cure anything from hair loss to cancer).
- The statements made are very dramatic, but they are refuted by reputable scientific organizations.
- The report lists good and bad (junk) foods (every food has a function, and there is no such thing as a miracle food).
- The statements are made to help sell a product (for example, a new book warns the consumer to stay away from common foods because they are supposedly harmful, although reputable scientific organizations throughout the country dismiss the claim as another unwarranted scare).

- The recommendations are based on only one study; each person is different, and such a report assumes that everyone reacts to the same foods in the same way.
- The statements are based on anecdotes rather than studies published under the scrutiny of fellow scientists; legitimate scientific studies are published after peer review, so other scientists are able to reproduce the results, or challenge them.
- The statements make blanket conclusions and ignore differences among individuals or groups.
- The conclusions drawn from a complex scientific study are too simplistic.

Don't be easily led to a conclusion—think twice

Detection of a chemical in a food is not automatically a violation of food safety standards. And just because a food is “all-natural” does not make it safer or more nutritious.

Before you believe news reports or pass along e-mail clippings regarding a health or safety scare, check it out on one of these “debunking” Web sites:

www.cdc.gov/hoax_rumors.htm

www.hoaxinfo.com

www.snopes2.com

www.breakthechain.org

www.quackwatch.com

www.healthfactsandfears.com

This document was developed in cooperation with the Food and Nutrition Science Alliance (FANSA), a partnership of four professional societies that have joined forces to speak with one voice on food and nutrition issues. Member organizations are the American Dietetic Association, American Society for Clinical Nutrition, American Society for Nutritional Sciences, and Institute of Food Technologists.